

Chapter 10

. . . for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

—Isaiah 56:7

Israel

Temple Mount

At the sound of the approaching vehicle, the structural engineer opened his pocket watch, noting the time before wiping the dust from his round thick-framed glasses. “He’s only an hour late. I swear another five minutes, and I’d have left,” He mumbled, “If it were anyone else . . .” Dr. Hansen looked up in futility

It was nearly 5:30 on Sunday afternoon. The sun was casting a soft auburn hue that washed everything to dun except the approaching bright-red Alpha Romeo Giulia sedan. The driver pulled into the gated construction entry in a cloud of dust. The car seemed entirely out of place in the ancient setting. Dr. Hansen noted the driver’s white and blue checkered keffiyeh and high-collared light blue silk kandora—a regional display of wealth. The wrap-around Gargoyle sunglasses were odd, but the gun-metal blue crocodile skin loafers were . . . well, just bizarre. Where do you even go to buy some of those? As the envoy approached, Dr. Hansen projected his well-practiced vague disposition. The tall Jordanian envoy of the Islamic Waqf advanced without offering his hand.

“Doctor Hansen, it was good of you to come on such short notice.” The Waqf was an Islamic trust funding the civil administration to maintain the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock. “What is your assessment, professor? Can the work proceed?”

“Outside of the Dome itself,” The engineer turned to face the iconic Byzantine edifice. “The structural integrity was not critically affected by the earthquake. Thankfully, the temporary

wall shoring still holds. Without core sampling, the vibrations from work on the new temple site do not seem to be causing any further damage that I can detect. Most of the quake damage was to the Gold Dome, which suffered catastrophic structural failure.” He knew that no reconstructive work could proceed without a complete estimate of the cost to repair the Dome of the Rock. That’s why he was here. The gold plate alone was estimated at north of 100 million. Let alone all the carved marble and intricate mosaics that could not be realistically replaced, only replicated. The cost would be staggering. That’s why the Jordanian envoy was here.

“And the Mosque?”

The engineer slowly shook his head at the futility of the situation. “That’s a different issue; the temporary shoring is not holding.” Only a few hundred yards away, the Al-Aqsa Mosque had also suffered damage, but its dome did not fail.

As one of the leading experts in his field, he was called off a job in Indonesia to address this project. His company already had men consulting on projects in the region. He was well familiar with the abrupt mannerisms of powerful men, so he didn’t like working on these types of projects, but here he was. Religion was a primary consideration for the political players in the Mid-East, so being from the Netherlands, he was considered a religiously neutral source. Versed with Muslim religious traditions and idiosyncrasies, he knew how far they would tolerate a nonbeliever.

I guess that’s why I was sent here. With all the archaeological digs in this place, Jerusalem’s gotta be chock-full of structural engineers. He thought, looking over the myriad structural problems, you don’t need to be a professor on this project. He turned to address the envoy without making eye contact. “The damage to its foundation is extensive and will require additional shoring and re-engineering. I fear that the only proper solution to repair it involves constructing reinforced

concrete buttresses around the entire structure. Then secure them to the existing stone foundation with rebar and plate.”

“How long do you think?”

“I’d say three months for the foundation and a minimum of two years for the cleanup, new infrastructure, and modern amenities.”

“You will then concur with our assessment that work can continue.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I will.” He slightly bowed his head to acknowledge the directive. He did not wish to be trapped in this place longer than necessary. “The sonic scans did not show any additional damage from the ongoing construction at the Third Temple site. With soil condition as it is, I will caution you to continue the scanning on a weekly basis to ensure there is no vibrational load shifting at either site. Since our company handles the overall progress inspections, I think hiring a third party to perform the scans would be appropriate.”

“Thank you for your time.” The envoy offered a slight bow as though to an inferior. He returned to his car, immediately oblivious to Dr. Hansen’s existence.

Arrogant as always, these Muslim higher-ups rarely acknowledged nonbelievers, let alone sought advice from them. At least the work can continue. Any more delays, and these guys just might get militant.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Israelis felt this would be an opportune time to start work on the Third Temple. Construction had begun five months earlier. Placed about a hundred feet north of the Dome—on what was thought to be the original site of the Second Temple—caused much debate among religious historians. The real reason it was placed there was so the new

construction would not interfere with existing structures. The Temple Institute, working on the Third Temple plans for over forty years, was in charge of the overall development, which was, to say the least, a politically charged issue.

After the six-day war in '67, Moshe Dayan struck an agreement with the Arab League giving them administration rights over the Temple Mount. Control of the Mount was split. Maintenance and construction repairs on the Holy Site have been managed through the Islamic Waqf, with Israel providing security to the Temple Mount. Jews were not welcome to pray there, or if they did, they were not to move their lips, so approval of the Third Temple was contentious at best. In keeping their open book policy regarding anything religious, site plans were provided online and on an electronic billboard at the entrance. Soon, cries of dissent arose from all quarters, including the Israeli PM's grandmother. Consensus demanded that the Temple should be for all peoples, not just Jews. The counter-argument was that the same policy should apply to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This was not heeded, but a compromise was struck. Israel would agree on the multi-religion temple if a new trust fund for the Third Temple could be established, and the Arab League would fund it.

Part of the deal included the removal of inscriptions against Christianity lining the outer walls of the Dome. These would be replaced by various statements of faith determined by an international committee. The global unity and diversity motto soon branded the project, and now the construction of the new Temple was declared the world's project. Reconstruction efforts were a different matter. With many Arab League countries over-contributing in a political attempt to gain status, the League would handle the remodeling of the two Domes alone. All reconstruction labor and materials were managed through the existing Waqf.

Continuing with the Hashemite legacy, the King of Jordan insisted that his country be the one to lead the reconstruction effort—with, of course, other Arab nations' input. The plans for reconstruction included a new infrastructure with modern sewer and water lines and installing a new 4" ductile water feed for fire protection. This decision was argued by traditionalists within the Arab League, who considered it a desecration of the Holy site. They were overridden by King Abdullah II, whose family had a history of being pro-modern. The decision would prove instrumental.

The following Monday, the intense sun bore down upon the four-man HDB—Horizontal Directional Boring—crew as they reported for work at the Temple Mount. Joining an army of workers from various countries within the Arab League, the team was assigned to the reconstruction project by the Jordanian government and placed under the authority of the Second Muslim Waqf. Security screening at the construction entry gate could take up to an hour.

Into their sixth day of operations, the team was friendly but nondescript. Waiting outside the main gate with some Syrian masons, the HDB crew was banally joking about the quality of Israeli food carts and the over usage of Kosher salt—with salt being the policeman of food. After waiting over an hour to pass through security, two crewmen headed for the supply depot to acquire more fuel and pack mortar.

"I sure hope those Cossacks finally brought the goodies." He whispered in Mesopotamian Arabic. Beard close-cropped and neat, he'd taken time to look his best this morning.

"Yes, I am a little anxious about our timing, and we can't stall much longer, even in front of these clowns." The team's HD boring expert heartedly agreed. Noticing the lead's change in

appearance, he reflexively looked over his shoulder at the entrance cameras but made no comment. He had dressed for work like any other day.

“Is Ashlar still freaking out?” The lead quietly inquired.

“No, I think he has finally bowed to the inevitable. After all, what did he expect when he volunteered, some kind of pilgrimage?” He chuckled at his own joke.

The lead did not see the humor. “How’s the little brother doing?”

“He’s eager as always and ready for the jump.” He replied a little more somberly.

The lead frowned at this. All I need is for some puppy to start peeing all over the place. An eager devotee must be carefully watched when plans change, and plans always seem to change in the field. Subtly shaking his head as he entered the resupply tent, he saw the containers they had expected. “At least it won’t be long now,” He spoke in a low voice to himself. A Grey Wolf with golden eyes—their legion’s symbol—had been printed under the corporate logo on three new five-gallon polymer mortar containers. They held a plasticine-like packing mortar of a co-crystallized nitroamine high explosive mixture of CL-20 and HMX. “Let’s get these set up.” He ordered, motioning for the motorized hand truck. Two Egyptian laborers transported the pallet containing packing rings and the five-gallon pails to the boring termination pit inside the Mosque. Around them, over thirty men from various Muslim countries worked hard on the reconstruction project.

Nearing the end of their shift, the boring crew had just finished drilling the final section beneath the floor of the Mosque, dragging in twenty feet of explosive-packed pipe. With a detonation velocity of close to 9.4 km/s-1, the mix would cause a massive explosion.

The HDB crew was comprised of ex-Syrian military Corvus agents. Three were attached to the First Cohort of the III Fulminata Legion based in the Taurus Mountains of South-Eastern

Turkey—Legion of the Grey Wolf. The leader was a former Syrian military intelligence officer and First Sergeant for the 4th Cohort of the III Fulminata—they were all Immortals.

Having re-entered the Mosque to recover the boring drill head and motor, the crew idly picked up. The lead was by a window, watching for the shift change. He wanted to minimize any collateral damage to the other workers. Looking out at the busy courtyard, he reflected on the recent events cascading over the precipice of his life, culminating in this audacious mission.

Is this my final destiny, the destiny that has driven me all my life? I cannot believe that I have been honed so sharply to make this one cut—this cannot be all there is. His breath shuddered during a deep exhale. A Syrian at heart, he had been weaned on stories of Arab greatness and Arabian mythology. Steeped in biblical tradition, Damascus was founded by Uz, son of Aram, son of Seth, son of Noah. In the 13th century BC, it played an intricate role in the middle east as the trade capital of the Aramaeans, who were overland traders linking the riches of Egypt to the western world. Trade and the politics that controlled it made Syria a vital country in the region until the fall of the Ottoman Empire, marking the rise of the modern era. Like most ex-Ottoman nations of the time, it was slow to modernize. In the latter half of the 20th century, Syria attempted to divest itself of its religious past and accept the Westernization now sweeping the world. Fundamentalists, fearful of secularism, refused to go down without a fight, and civil war ensued. During this fighting period, the team leader came to age.

Two and a half years earlier, he was a lieutenant in the Syrian army. All his youthful visions of patriotism and loyalty were challenged when his army unit retook a rural town from Islamic extremists. As an intelligence officer, it was his job to debrief survivors and arrest collaborators. Brutally marked by ashes, executions, and rape, their trail was not hard to follow.

While debriefing civilians to accurately chronicle events and gather evidence on atrocities, he was interrupted by women shouting out demands for justice. They were so disruptive he had to have them forcibly quieted. Finally, getting them to shut up and make some sense, they convinced him to follow three teens who had somehow avoided forced conscription by the extremists. As they entered the town's northwest quarter, whole neighborhoods seemed frozen in place. He grimly noted the many dead who appeared to have collapsed where they stood. Some were partially burned by the cooking fires they had been attending, and others were slumped-over with food and drink still in hand. Dead eyes followed him everywhere, accusing him of abandoned futility. It had all the markings of a silent gas attack. After confirming it with the corps physician, he reported it to Division.

The Division commander was quick to act, but in a somewhat unpredictable manner—they arrested him. Along with the investigating physician and corpsmen, they were bound, blindfolded, and quietly transported off-line. They were placed under barracks restriction and were effectively cut off from all outside communication for two solid weeks.

During this confinement, nobody wanted to discuss their present or future circumstances. It was easy to figure out why; the Syrian army launched the gas attack. Once evident the incident would not go public, he was quietly discharged without honors and told to keep his mouth shut or face sterner consequences. Cut loose and bitter, he realized he could not go home and face the public humiliation a dishonorable discharge would bring to his upper-class family. He also didn't want to stay in Syria. The disgrace of joining pathetic refugees, whose only option was to rely on the charity of uncaring souls, was more than he could bear. Relegated to a nomadic lifestyle, he wandered about for months finding only the odd job. He had to resort to petty theft in desperate moments just to stay alive. His mere existence, now dependent on another's loss, made him

morally conflicted. Life-long notions of honorable destiny faded as his appetite for suicide increased with each degrading theft. Finally, arrested for stealing food from a street vendor. The police identified him as ex-military and jailed him until it was time for public punishment. They would publicly take a hand for his crime. It was an ages-old deterrent where once the jail was at capacity, the authorities would execute the sentences of criminals in a week-long spectacle. It was the only form of public entertainment allowed.

Cast into a large sandstone storeroom converted to a holding cell, he had difficulty finding a space to sit down. The room was crowded with prisoners serving various sentences of up to five years. Some political detainees waited years just for a hearing. The choice outer wall spaces were occupied only by those who could contest them, and small cliques would regularly form to defend these choice spots. Food was delivered twice a day in large two-handled troughs, one filled with brackish water; red Solo cups were the only utensils. With no order to the feeding, it usually began as a free-for-all. Eventually, like most prisons, a single man would rise as the “Alpha Dog,” always with a pack of mindless sycophants in support. One of these pack members tried to question him on the first night, but thoroughly exhausted, he paid the man little heed.

The next day when the food arrived, the Alpha’s pack took control, parceling out the food as they saw fit. Along with many others, he was not included. Sitting near the center of the crowded room, he kept to himself while patiently determining the pack’s pecking order. Singling out the Alpha’s primary enforcer, he waited until the next feeding time to make his move.

Taking out the enforcer would not be an issue. He could tell the man had no formal training, just a bully’s resolve when facing down weaker men. The only unknown factor was how the other prisoners would react. They were criminals, after all, typically ambivalent to all else but

themselves. Some may intervene hoping to gain favor, but odds were, they would let the gang settle their own affairs. But he was hungry, and that was the primary issue.

When the enforcer pushed past, he rose up and, forming a knife hand, struck the man's carotid artery with focused force—the man dropped like a bag of cement. Next, he targeted the Alpha-Dog, who, slow to realize the events unfolding before him, was caught off-balance by the force of the sudden attack. Lunging away from the unexpected charge, the Alpha rolled over some men, quickly rebounding with a ham-fisted roundhouse that was effortlessly avoided.

The brutal fight lasted way longer than it should have. Weak from hunger, the attacker barely had enough energy to fight the Alpha, but it was enough—for what he lacked in power, he more than made up for in training. Finally throwing the Alpha down, he calmly placed his foot on his chin, and yanking up his arm, he broke the Alpha's neck where he lay.

Standing at the food trough, he trembled as blood seeped from his nose and lips. The sudden assault, combined with the efficient brutality of the attack, cast a pall over the prisoners. The room, now eerily silent, made the ringing in his ears almost deafening. A few long moments passed while he caught his breath. "Look," He croaked, "There is enough here for all of you. Just because they treat you like animals doesn't mean you should become one." Spell broken, three hefty men from different room parts rose up to join the fair parceling out of food. The Alpha's former pack retreated to hide amongst the general population, where they were quickly singled out and beaten mercilessly. The enforcer—attacked where he lay—was never to awake again. A chorus of mutterings steadily rose as the previously unfavored weakly made their way to feed.

"Orhan, is that you? A surprised voice shouted from behind, "What in Jahannam has brought you to this place?" It was the Captain of the Guard, and at this shout, the rising tumult within the cell quickly abated.

Shocked to hear his name aloud, Orhan turned to see a familiar face peering through the bars of the entry gate. It was an old classmate of his from the Syrian Military Academy. “What are *you* doing here?” Orhan asked in a condescending tone, for the Captain had graduated in the top twenty of their class.

The Captain laughed heartily. “Just like you to criticize, the real question is: *What are you doing here?*” Accentuating with his hands, he had comically emphasized each word.

After pulling Orhan from the holding cell, the Captain placed him in a room off the makeshift prison’s central courtyard. Here, two women, who reeked of old oil and smoke, wordlessly cleaned and fed him. Moments after they left, Orhan promptly fell asleep.

Two hours later, the Captain returned in a reasonably jovial mood. “Orhan, my friend!” he shouted, entering the clay-walled room.

Orhan sat up abruptly, much refreshed by the ablution and short nap. The fact that he didn’t stink so badly made him feel more restored than he actually was.

“I couldn’t believe it when I read your name on the day’s catch list.” The Captain poured some vodka into two earthenware saucers. “To the great Orhan,” He mockingly toasted, “Soon to be Orhan the one-handed.” He laughed, spilling vodka down the front of his shirt.

Orhan eyed him, tactically reviewing his current position. Even if I knock this fool out, I’m still screwed—but what the hell, I’d rather die fighting. He drank slowly, wincing as the liquid burned cuts on his lips and mouth.

“Ah, my friend, you have the eyes of a cobra,” The Captain pointed the bottle at him, “Before you strike your last blow, there are some people here who want to meet you.” He poured another round as the door opened behind Orhan.

“Come, come, gentleman . . .” As he stood, the Captain said in English, “here is the prize I spoke of.” Heading towards the door, the Captain stopped in front of Orhan, and leaning in with a wary eye, he whispered in Aramaic. “I would hear these men out. There is much profit in what they say—for both of us.” As the Captain turned to go, he hesitated for a moment, then with a broad smile, he set the bottle back on the table. Stopping briefly at the door, a sudden look of apprehension ran across his face. “May your agreements profit you both.” He solemnly stated, sweeping his arm out with a formal bow. Laughing uproariously, he banged the door shut.

Offering no introduction, the two men sat down opposite. The first to speak was a clean-shaven diminutive man attired in an open linen-white Nairobi coat with a black cotton undershirt over beige-colored western silk pants. He seemed out of place in the dingy clay-walled room with its sandy floor. Looking more the part, the other man sported a manicured beard groomed to a point on the chin. He wore a light grey kandora with a single button collar. His head was wrapped in a clean checkered black and white keffiyeh that Orhan immediately recognized as PLO colors.

The small man unrolled a piece of E-paper from his coat, and in a mechanical tone, he read in Arabic. “You are Orhan, ibn Abadi, ibn Ashear, from the tribe of the Banu Hilal . . .”

After extensively detailing Orhan’s family background, including his father’s political credentials, he continued on to Orhan’s military education, accomplishments, and service history down to his last duty assignment. As the dossier was read, the other man just sat and watched, his grey eyes inscrutable.

Finishing the report, the little man looked up. “You seem to possess many talents in demand. What brings you to a place such as this?”

“Who’s asking,” Orhan shot back, “You or him?” With the vodka renewing his confidence, he poured himself another.

The small man paused to mop his brow, “My, it’s close in here, is it not? Forgive me; I’m not accustomed to this climate. May I . . .?”

Orhan simply nodded, filling the other vessel. He did not offer any to the silent man dressed in Muslim attire. His eyes follow the bottle, Orhan observed. So maybe not Muslim. Interesting.

Sipping a little at first, the small man drained the saucer holding it out for more. “Good vodka. Bulgarian, I believe.” He drained the second saucer. “Is this information about you accurate?”

Orhan sat back, considering the situation. Obviously, these men are recruiters, but their manner does not meet their appearance. This little guy’s definitely European—by his familiarity with the vodka, I’d say most likely Slavic—but the other one . . . now he’s a problem. Although dressed like PLO, he’s anything but. He’s never attempted to establish his importance or express any dominating will; for that matter, he’s too subdued. Intrigued, Orhan decided to play along.

“It is. Your detail is remarkable, considering how long it’s been since you became aware of my existence. Even though I have forgotten some events you accurately describe, my compliments to your sources.

“Thank you, we endeavor to be accurate. We have a proposal for you to . . .”

Orhan cut him off. “Before you begin, Why the costumes? Are you gentlemen going to a masquerade later?”

The PLO-garbed man suddenly exploded with laughter. “Am I *that obvious*?” “Nobody else has even questioned my little ruse,” he said in English, looking at the small man.

“Your demeanor and hygiene give you away,” Orhan responded in the same tongue, “They are far too polite to be PLO,” Orhan smiled. He was glad to have guessed correctly; it had been too long since he had. Outside of the vodka, a faint ember of hope now glowed within him.

“Yes, well, as my esteemed ah . . . chronicler has stated, you seem to possess many talents in demand. We belong to a publicly discreet organization called Corvus. Our noble mission is to bring about world peace through unification. We are in need of soldiers for this cause and men who can lead them; this is what has brought us to you.”

“You, of course, meant what *led* you here. It was my academy associate who brought you here. Does he work for this . . . this Corvus?”

“No. The Captain is sort of ah . . . a talent scout for the lack of a better term. He thinks we are PLO.”

“I doubt that. His type is more likely concerned with your money than your affiliations. He always was materialistically self-absorbed—foolishly so.”

“Yes, and that makes him quite useful to our purpose.”

The room grew silent as Orhan considered the circumstances. He resumed the discourse, running out on a new tack. “So not recruitment then, more like conscription, and I have the impression there is little choice.” He said with some force, “it appears my only way out of this box lies with you two. As you already stated, your organization relies upon anonymity.”

“At this point, you have a company name, and that’s all. You are no danger to us; we are of no danger to you.” He poured himself a vodka. “If you are interested, I will give you more information to help you decide. We elect not to work with anybody unwilling—the training is too expensive. It rests entirely with you. Your say-so should be enough for a man of principle such as yourself.”

Orhan knew he had been politely trapped, which intrigued him even further. “Okay, let’s have it.” Irritated by the small man’s barely perceptible smile, he sat up to resume the briefing. We will see what we will see, my little friend. A desperate man risks nothing.

“Corvus is establishing legions in various key economic and strategic areas across the globe. Modeled after fourth-century Roman armies, they are forming Cohorts that are . . . well, logistically light. Primarily equipped with sword and shield, our assault troops specialize in close combat and are protected by lightweight anti-ballistic armor. Their main tactical advantage is the rapid assimilation and deployment of an enemy’s military assets, requiring little logistic staging. Primarily trained for police action and crowd control, our legions are well disciplined and designed to be tactically nondestructive to infrastructure and sympathetic to basic human necessities.” Looking up, he paused for comments.

Orhan was staring off into the distance, and sensing he was fully engaged, he waited politely. Returning his attention to the pause in monologue, Orhan rolled his hand, gesturing for him to continue. The chronicler thumb-tapped the e-paper, proceeding to the next section.

“The legion bases are all self-sufficient and entirely off-grid. Equipped with medical, hospitality, and entertainment divisions, they meet the primary needs of the soldiers they contain. All members are paid a wage in the host country’s denomination,” He looked up. “We have no bank as such but provide for internet banking. The pay scales are based upon the American army’s rates as they are, by far, the most significant contract army in the world and pretty much set the bench.” He nodded to his saucer, which Orhan refilled, taking another for himself.

“Performance bonuses, advances, and loans are handled by a merit system of the legion commander’s choosing. English is the language of the legions. Uniforms, armor, weapons, and square meals are all provided. Entertainment expenses, however, are not. Equipment and uniform replacement are also added expenses. Corvus prides itself on the quality of life for its troopers. We hire the best chefs, doctors, and support staff.” He described a legion’s make-up, training facilities, and command structures, trailing off when he got to the recruiting incentive section, correctly

assuming it didn't apply to this applicant. "Well, that's about it." He looked up, signaling the end of the brief.

Orhan got up to move about the room. Patiently waiting for him to respond, five minutes passed before he heard the chronicler ask if more information was needed. Orhan ignored him. He was having trouble believing all this. It was too . . . after another couple of minutes, he returned to his seat. "What's next? I sign a contract?"

"Essentially," The pseudo-Arab responded, "But since no court can weigh in on its terms, it's more of an agreement—a binding agreement." He added politely, his meaning unmistakable.

Orhan's many internal questions were now answering themselves as he once again sat in contemplative thought. This presents a course that may lead back to an avenue I can use. I need funds. "You discussed pay. Any chance getting some, like, up-front?"

"With your background, I am authorized to pay you a substantial signing bonus of 500,000 Syrian pounds."

Orhan grinned, "But that's less than 1,000 US."

Reading him correctly, he smiled broadly. "Yes, but it is ample enough for you to get your ass cleaned up and report to your assigned legion."

"Okay," Orhan laughed, "How are assignments determined?"

"All new members are subjected to a battery of tests, both physical and psychological in nature, to determine their training. But I feel your talents will find their place in short order."

Fatigued from days of malnutrition, Orhan had to focus. The mental games and alcohol helped, but he was still undecided. These people are calm, respectful, and well-informed. And that points to the likelihood of a powerful organization. So why the hesitation? I'm tired of this unforgiving nomadic lifestyle that has so significantly reduced me. Hell, I even stooped to petty

theft. He shook his head. One more chance at glory and honor? I've always felt destined for something great—that's the real reason you never killed yourself, not because of some God-delusional idea of eternal damnation. It was a time for honesty. He knew he'd been hooked; they did too. He looked off into his past. He would not allow himself to be bound again by some undefined notion of divine power; it was his choice, his will. He recalled the maxim that the nature of a man must always decide what is best for his nature. He would join these men only until it was no longer convenient. "Okay, I'm in. What happens next," Orhan drank directly from the bottle, "And when do I get some funds?" He leaned back, laughing nervously.

They all leaned back, laughing in relief.

After only six weeks of training with sword and shield, his mastery of heavy infantry tactics was evident. Basically, the same stuff he learned at the Academy. The XII Fulminata commander was so impressed with his learning capacity he promoted him to the elite 1st Cohort, giving him a squad. Over the next two months, proving his superiority in simulated combat trials, he was again honored and promoted to First Sergeant of the Fourth Cohort. After two weeks of joint operations within the Sixth Cohort, a clone Cohort, he excelled in battlefield communications and small unit tactics. He received additional commendations, which led to an opportunity to return to intelligence and a job offer from the head of Military operations, a creepy-looking German fellow named Lord Adolphus.

Introduced to the reality of clone Jump transfers, something he initially discounted, he was invited to join a select unit Lord Adolphus was forming. This unit employed suicide attack methods without losing the capabilities of the Alpha. When an Alpha died in an attack, the Alpha would immediately jump into the nearest clone-blank, irrespective of distance. Different than a suicide

attack—where the asset is always wasted, along with the skill set—this method allowed for repeated attacks by highly trained assets. As a lark, the force called themselves clone-borne rangers before settling on the Immortals, an elite force from the old Achaemenid Empire.

Informed that he'd been cloned from day one, he now understood that the recruitment tests were to identify unique characteristics. The training ops were there to see if they could be expressed. After a recruit's initial testing, those possessing strong will were slated for cloning. The mission instructor explained that the knowledge of being cloned often caused unfavorable reactions from most alphas. He also noted that not all alphas are jump-stable, in which case their DNA templates are cycled into the legion for laborers or shock troops. For these templates, physical characteristics were the primary consideration, as mental stability and personality type were the primary concerns for a jump candidate.

Before they had approached him with this mission, his clones were already developed and jump-ready. At first, he was utterly stunned by their audacity. Then, after a joint briefing with other strike teams, he appreciated the logic behind their actions and why. They were striking at the root of religious fanaticism, exposing it for what he knew it to be—a method of voluntary enslavement.

As a Syrian, his country suffered many centuries of bloodshed on the altar of religion. He had once considered being a martyr for *a* religion. Now he would play the martyr for religion—only this time would he oppose the idea.

From the Mosque's window, Orhan watched as the current shift workers left through the Temple Mount's security exit. He knew the next shift would not be admitted until all personnel was accounted for—they had about fifteen minutes before the jump.

If he was to be reborn in a clone, then so be it. He would have many more lives to reap the rewards. They were all shown evidence of successful jumps, and he would soon find out whether they were real or just some elaborate game. Well, enough of this wool-gathering; I have a job to do. Shaking his head as though to clear it, he looked around the construction area one last time. "Is this what fulfilling your destiny looks like?" He whispered, quietly mocking himself as he turned from the window. His deliberate stride over to the detonator helped stiffen his resolve. "It's time, corporal Ashlar." With an assuredness he did not feel, he smiled, and picking up the triggering device, he looked over his team, taking in *their* resolve.

Ashlar looked up at him, visibly nervous. "Now again, where will we jump to, sir?"

"Since there is no longer any risk of capture, I can finally tell you. We will be reawakened in our clones at the III Fulminata labs in the Tarsus Mountains." Orhan quietly voiced, mindful of the man's trepidations—it was the third time Ashlar had asked that very question.

"Think of it, my brother." Ashlar's little brother said with much enthusiasm, "Rebirth. We are going to be renewed. Your cancer will no longer be an issue. Just imagine a whole new body that can be regenerated again."

"Yes, I . . . If it takes. They said it doesn't always take." Ashamed of his fear, Ashlar looked away.

Orhan glanced at the HBD tech. If he's got any second doubts, he's hiding them well. Aware of the sudden attention, the trooper faintly smiled at Orhan, giving the thumbs up.

"Men, I believe it's time. I will see you all back at the legion." Orhan depressed the trigger.

Swirls of light exploded as he felt the air pull from his transient being. Disorientated, he was soaring through what seemed to be sky. He felt, twisted. Feeling like he was swimming in midair, he tried waving his hands in a futile effort to turn about. Ears compressed, he tried clearing them to no avail. Panic mounting, he abandoned himself to the circumstances, willing himself to calm. Focused only on the experience, the dull sound of rushing wind became soothing. Fear diminishing, he became more observant. A distant vortex seemed to funnel in the sky like a white hole. He felt drawn to it. No longer concerned with his state of being, he closed his mind to the vision. The pulling sensation of the vortex intensified. Again, he felt the odd twisting.

In his discorporate prescient state, all movement seemed to cease. Now floating, suspended in warmth, the vortex drew closer. He felt, more than heard, people calling out to him—welcoming him in. Suddenly, an image appeared away from the light, indistinct but churning. It distracted him. Faces of past memories partially solidified into one being before morphing into another. This cycle continued, with each countenance reminding him of the next as though he was controlling it. He soon grew bored with the game. At last, a figure he sort of recognized but could not name emerged as that of a hard-faced female, not one he knew. “Who are you that wears so many likenesses?” He asked the noumenon.

“I am an Ifrit from your father’s tribe.” The voice echoed in his prescience.

He now thought he recognized her. “Of the Jinn you command, am I now to become one?”

“Only if you wish it.”

“I do not.”

“Then return to the earth where we will fulfill the destiny that awaits you.”

The face shimmered into a scene from Titus's siege of Jerusalem, except the besieging Roman soldiers held modern weapons. Then, it shifted to the still unfinished Temple on the Temple Mount, where people of all races were comingling to celebrate the first day of world peace. There was no trace of the explosion he had just set off.

“Is this the future?”

The face shimmered back into form. “A possible future if you are willing to accept it. It is within your destiny not to walk a path but to forge one. This has been the very cause of your ruin. This is why you have been placed before *me*.”

“What would you have me do, follow *you* to another ruin? Religious wars are always self-serving. How insignificant the soldier is to an omnipotent God, cast aside in the barren victory of predetermined outcome. They hold no *métier*, no place for virtue.”

“Do you not also cast away things that no longer hold value? You were created for a purpose—fulfill that purpose.”

“I grow weary of this game; the light holds comfort and rest.”

“The light holds no reward for you, only condemnation and punishment.”

“And what is it that you offer?” He challenged.

“Another option. Return and see what avails you, what you must fulfill. A sprinter sees the end line, but the marathon runner can only set his sights on it. Trusting only to stay the course does that runner reach the end. There you will not only find rest but find your true self.”

He felt the truth about the light; therefore, the Ifrit may also be true. He knew what he needed to find and that the only way to see it was to return. By depressing the detonator, he had already made his choice. “Then, I will return.”

He awoke strapped to an upright gurney at the III Fulminata Legion's lab. The sensory onslaught of the room was so intense his body stiffened as though to squeeze out the sounds—he pulled hard at the restraints. Even closed, his eyes hurt from images bombarding them; the pain in his lungs was intense, as a foul stench emanated from each exhale. Recoiling from this sensory bombardment, his essence retreated into a warm mist that dampened the harsh reality. He could feel another presence nearby—heard it speak: "I'm okay. You don't need to sedate me, Doctor." It even sounded like his voice, only more resonant.

"I have issued the sedative already." The far-off voice replied, "So when you wake, you will be in a better position to adapt to this new body."

Confused by this exchange, he could not distinguish the vague images moving through the mist thickening around him. He formed words in his mind. "*Who's there?*" His words carried through the mist, "*Who was just speaking?*" No response.

Space gradually darkened until there was nothing. Slipping into a new consciousness, he imagined himself lying on the sandy floor of a safe cave, contently watching as a sandstorm blew over useless ruins of antiquity.

* * *

The explosion at the Temple Mount was initially diagnosed as an undiscovered gas leak from the earthquake. It had all but demolished what remained of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Temple Mount was accessible only to Israeli military personnel and a handful of third-party investigators. The Israeli government ordered all work at the Third Temple site to cease until the site investigation was completed. The Jordanian government, outraged when access to the Temple reconstruction site was denied to their representatives, prepared a retaliatory demonstration. In Jordan, Palestinian protesters were herded up and bused in by the hundreds.

